

Greauxing Resilience at Home

Town of Washington, Virginia:
Rush River Commons Mixed-Use Development



GEORGETOWN CLIMATE CENTER

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Louisiana is one of the hardest-hit areas in the United States as extreme weather events and regular flooding become more frequent and intense.¹ These challenges often fall “first and worst” on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or “BIPOC” and low-income communities.² This is especially true in the U.S. Gulf Coast region and the state of Louisiana.

Over time, these challenges are being exacerbated by population increases and transitions as climate and non-climate drivers (e.g., people moving out of urban centers into more rural areas) influence where people choose — or are able — to live.

In southeast Louisiana, resilient, affordable housing initiatives are critical to ensuring equitable adaptation that takes into consideration the myriad overlapping challenges facing all Louisianans, but especially those living in communities that have long borne a disproportionate burden of risk.

Over a two-year period between fall 2020 and spring 2022, **Capital Region Planning Commission** and **Georgetown Climate Center** partnered with dozens of people from government, private, and nonprofit sectors and community stakeholders in Region Seven of the **Louisiana Watershed Initiative**.³ The result of that partnership effort is **Greauxing Resilience at Home: A Regional Vision**⁴ (Regional Vision), a resource to inform Region Seven’s ongoing work to increase community resilience by promoting affordable housing and nature-based solutions.

Regional and local governments in Region Seven can use the Regional Vision to identify potential legal, planning, and policy tools and projects to increase the affordability and availability of housing and the use of nature-based solutions. In addition, the Regional Vision offers insights for policymakers across Louisiana, throughout the Gulf Coast region, and nationally.

This report is composed of 24 individual case studies developed by Georgetown Climate Center to support the Regional Vision. These case studies describe best and emerging practices, tools, and examples from Louisiana and other U.S. jurisdictions to make progress on these complex and challenging issues. These case studies are intended to provide transferable lessons and ideas for regional and local governments addressing housing and mitigating flood risk as integrated parts of comprehensive community resilience strategies. Collectively, these case studies present a suite, although not an exhaustive list of tools and approaches that can be used to facilitate any of these efforts.

1 STATE OF LA., LOUISIANA CLIMATE ACTION PLAN: CLIMATE INITIATIVES TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNOR 15–16 (Feb. 2022), available at <https://gov.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/CCI-Task-force/CAP/ClimateActionPlanFinal.pdf>.

2 See *id.* at 15–17.

3 The Louisiana Watershed Initiative is an effort to create a paradigm shift in floodplain management towards a strategy that approaches flood risk reduction from a nature-based solutions and land-use-based approach. A part of this approach includes identifying eight separate regional watershed management areas to assist in achieving cross-jurisdictional activities.

Region Seven is one of these eight watershed regions. Region Seven encompasses the upper part of the toe of Louisiana’s boot. It spans eastward from the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge across the Northshore (i.e., north of Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas) to Mississippi and along the Mississippi River to the Bonnet Carré Spillway. The region includes 13 parishes and 45 incorporated municipalities.

4 To reflect their connection to Louisiana’s cultural heritage, the project team and members of Region Seven that participated in this process chose to use the word “Greaux,” a French-inspired phonetic spelling of the word “Grow,” to brand this product.

Where possible, all the case studies share a consistent organizational format to allow easier cross-comparison of tools, processes, and takeaways:

- The **Background** section introduces the regional and local context (e.g., location, demographics) for each case study, including the following facing each jurisdiction: extreme weather risks, housing and environmental challenges, and development pressures.
- The **Housing** section focuses on the legal, planning, and policy tools and projects that have been designed and implemented to support the growth and preservation of housing affordability and availability.
- The **Environment** section highlights how vulnerable habitats like floodplains and other open spaces are being restored, conserved, and protected as a part of comprehensive resilience strategies to provide important ecosystem and community benefits like reducing flood risk and creating community assets, such as parks and trails.
- The **Community Engagement** section summarizes how governments have provided different types of public engagement opportunities and how affected residents have contributed to these planning and decisionmaking processes.
- The **Funding** section identifies how the programs, plans, and projects discussed have been funded by federal, state, and local government and private and nongovernmental sources.
- The **Next Steps** section captures the anticipated future actions that featured case study jurisdictions may take in implementing these tools and strategies.
- The **Considerations and Lessons Learned** section concludes with the primary takeaways from each example that other regional and local policymakers and communities may consider when developing or implementing their own housing and resilience strategies using these legal, planning, and policy tools.

A few additional notes about the case studies:

- **The case studies selected prioritize relatable and scalable models from places similar to Louisiana:** Wherever possible, Georgetown Climate Center aimed to acknowledge and lift up the work of jurisdictions and nongovernmental actors in Region Seven and neighboring watershed regions to inspire peer-to-peer sharing and actions from as close to home as possible. These resources are drawn from 12 states, with an emphasis on regions and local areas in the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic: Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Examples and lessons drawn from these regions are easiest to apply to a Louisianan context because they feature similar geography or analogous impacts from flooding and other climate effects.
- **There are no perfect, “one-size-fits-all” solutions:** While the case studies and resource entries informing the Region Vision are instructive for Region Seven and beyond, none of them are “perfect” examples of how to solve these complex and challenging issues. Georgetown Climate Center found no single case study or resource that provides a point-for-point or model for what Region Seven is trying to accomplish. No other jurisdiction identified is currently trying to integrate housing, flooding, equity, resilience, and population changes together in a single plan, ordinance, or policy. However, some jurisdictions are moving in that direction, or are making progress on discrete elements of what will eventually become a more holistic strategy. Therefore, this report and the Regional Vision draw analogous connections and recommendations that can be combined to facilitate more comprehensive planning and land-use efforts.

The case studies in this report were informed by interviews with practitioners and community leaders in charge of designing and overseeing this work. No statements or opinions, however, should be attributed to any individual or organization included in the *Acknowledgements* section of this report.

It is also important to note that the examples described in each case study are ongoing and the content included in this report is current as of spring 2022. For future updates about these and other case studies and the Regional Vision, please visit [Greaxing Resilience at Home: A Regional Vision](#) and Georgetown Climate Center’s [Adaptation Clearinghouse](#).

Town of Washington, Virginia

Rush River Commons Mixed-Use Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Town of Washington, Virginia is a small rural town that largely benefits from the service and tourism industries. Initially funded by private citizen Chuck Akre, Rush River Commons is a project of the Sherwood Fund, the Akre family's operating foundation. Rush River Commons is a proposed mixed-use development project for the Town of Washington. The project prioritizes the historic character of the Washington community and respects the surrounding natural environment. The proposed plan includes building a community center, office space for nonprofits, and affordable rental housing on a nine-acre property located in the town. The project also includes a plan for restoring the land's natural wetlands and amenities. Construction of Rush River Commons is set to begin in early 2022.

The Rush River Commons project shows how mixed-use development can be designed in a way that is compatible with rural communities. It is also a good example of how local policymakers can help create comprehensive plans and ordinances that support both public and private affordable housing ventures.

BACKGROUND

The Town of Washington, Virginia is a small rural town that sits in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.¹ It is located in Rappahannock County and serves as the county seat with around 100 residents and a majority white population.² Most of the land in Washington is used for agriculture or is open space.³

¹ THE TOWN OF WASHINGTON, VA. <https://washingtonva.gov/> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021).

² *Washington*, DATA COMMONS, <https://datacommons.org/place/geoId/5183248> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021); *Washington*, DATA COMMONS, <https://datacommons.org/place/geoId/5183248?topic=Demographics#Population-by-race> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021);

³ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 15 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>.

Washington's economy is based in the service and tourism industries. The town also serves as the community and cultural center of Rappahannock County.⁴ Washington lacks a range of employment opportunities and revenue generation, and tourism demands change.⁵ Washington's population has been decreasing and there is a "need to provide community services to its residents and space for public services."⁶

OVERVIEW OF RUSH RIVER COMMONS

Rush River Commons is a nine-acre property located in Washington.⁷ The property used to house the Black Kettle Motel and Restaurant over half a century ago.⁸ Rush River Commons is a proposed mixed-development project that meets Washington's current and future community goals while supporting population growth.⁹

It is designed to honor the historic character and culture of the Washington community as well as respecting the surrounding natural environment. It is also Washington's first mixed-use development project.¹⁰ The project's special use permit was approved in September 2021 and the plan is for construction to begin in early 2022.¹¹

At large, the proposed plan includes building a community center, office space for nonprofits, and affordable rental housing.¹² All of these new spaces will be connected by elevated bridges and walkways over the wetlands and streams.¹³ These spaces will be divided into a commercial community cluster and a residential cluster.¹⁴

⁴ *Id.* at 2.

⁵ *Id.* at 14.

⁶ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 2 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>; TOWN OF WASHINGTON, VA., TOWN OF WASHINGTON COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 7 (Sept. 11, 2017), *available at* <https://washingtonva.gov/ordinances/Comprehensive%20Plan%2020170911.pdf>.

⁷ *The Land*, RUSH RIVER COMMONS, <https://rushrivercommons.com/#the-land> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021).

⁸ *History*, RUSH RIVER COMMONS, <https://rushrivercommons.com/#history> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021).

⁹ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 2 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ben Peters, *Town Council approves Rush River Commons*, RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS (Sept. 22, 2021), https://www.rappnews.com/news/landuse/town-council-approves-rush-river-commons/article_10ccf932-1512-11ec-aff5-2b5c2a7d8b7f.html.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *The Vision*, RUSH RIVER COMMONS, <https://rushrivercommons.com/#the-vision> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

The commercial cluster will include office and retail space as well as a new modern space and location for the Rappahannock Food Pantry.¹⁵ The office space is intended for nonprofits, health providers, and other service agencies.

For the residential cluster, the project team and town are looking at several different housing groupings that will include townhouses, referred to as village homes, and stacked housing, referred to as villas and will include three main structures situated around a central green park space.¹⁶ The residential and commercial clusters will be connected by a paved pathway, which will also connect to the Town of Washington's pedestrian trail system.¹⁷ The goal is that the new residential area will provide attractive and affordable housing options for county residents and support modest population growth in the town.

The Town of Washington has a Planned Unit Development (PUD) Ordinance, which allows PUD “to increase residential population in the Town . . . [by permitting] zoning flexibility and flexibility in the design of new residential uses and mixed uses . . .” in a way that was “not [previously] available under strict application of the zoning ordinance” before 2019.¹⁸ In the special use permit issued for this work, the project team expressed that “for greater flexibility, creativity, responsiveness to site conditions, and the mixed-use nature of the development, the [Rush River Commons] project requests the use of the recently enacted” PUD ordinance.¹⁹ The PUD ordinance was a major contributor to Rush River Commons project's ability to move forward as a project.

Additionally, both Rappahannock County and the Town of Washington's comprehensive plans support affordable housing and diversity, which helped set the Rush River Commons project up for success.

Rappahannock County's comprehensive plan was adopted on December 7, 2020.²⁰ The plan includes land use goals, principles, and policies. One principle is to “Encourage residential

¹⁵ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 2 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Town of Washington, Va., An Amendment to the Zoning Ordinance of the Town of Washington to Permit Planned Unit Development (2019), *available at* <https://washingtonva.gov/ordinances/PUDOrdinance2019.pdf>.

¹⁹ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 16 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>.

²⁰ RAPPAHANNOCK CNTY. BD. OF SUPERVISORS, RAPPAHANNOCK COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN (Dec. 7, 2020), *available at* https://cms9files.revize.com/rappahannockva/201207%20ADOPTED%20Rappahannock%20County%20Amended%20Comprehensive%20Plan_clean.pdf.

development in designated growth areas and recognize the importance of affordable housing.”²¹ Policies to implement this principle are:

1. Encourage residential development within the designated village areas, infill development to be preferred; allow for the broadest possible range of housing opportunities, styles, configurations, and affordability within the context of a rural, agricultural community;
2. Discourage residential strip development along public roadways that might create traffic hazards and detract from the overall scenic value of the county;
3. Encourage and foster a sense of community within designated village areas through support of community facilities and events; and
4. Consider affordable housing needs, particularly for seniors and the disabled, and explore aging-in-place opportunities.²²

The Town of Washington’s comprehensive plan was adopted on September 12, 2017.²³ The plan’s housing goal is to “Create a Town with a strong sense of community built on diverse housing costs, mixed income levels and a welcoming residential population.”²⁴

HOUSING

The Rush River Commons project is grounded in the notion that part of what makes a resilient community is providing diverse housing options. The residential cluster of Rush River Commons is designed to “provide attractive and affordable housing options for the community” that will support population growth in Washington.²⁵ It is located next to the commercial cluster, which will provide residents of the affordable housing units access to important community services. In the residential cluster, there will potentially be between 18 and 20 housing units, the majority of which are guaranteed to be affordable housing units.

One issue Rappahannock County faces is having a decreasing and aging population. There are older residents in substandard housing and others who cannot find affordable housing options. This has created an impediment to develop a healthy mix of residents in the county. Through the

²¹ *Id.* at 88.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Comprehensive Plan*, TOWN OF WASHINGTON, VA., <https://washingtonva.gov/planning-commission/> (last visited Dec. 6, 2021).

²⁴ TOWN OF WASHINGTON, VA., TOWN OF WASHINGTON COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 37 (Sept. 12, 2017), *available at* <https://washingtonva.gov/ordinances/Comprehensive%20Plan%2020170911.pdf>.

²⁵ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 2 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>.

Rush River Commons project, the hope is that these affordable housing units will help residents to think more broadly and positively about what affordable housing means and looks like in their community. A goal of the project is to provide tangible housing options residents can see and visit themselves, which will break down negative stereotypes about affordable housing.

ENVIRONMENT

The project has the goal of supporting and adding to the historic culture of Washington while respecting the surrounding natural environment and “its potential impact on its neighbors.”²⁶

Wetlands encompass over 30 percent of the property.²⁷ Rush River Commons intends to restore the existing wetlands by removing invasive vegetation and planting native species that will support restoration and biodiversity.²⁸

Additionally, a stream corridor runs north to south through the center of the Rush River Commons’s location.²⁹ There are also many trees at the location. The project aims to preserve both of these natural amenities.

Lastly, Rush River Commons is being designed to use the Town of Washington’s water and wastewater services and therefore will not rely on well or septic systems.³⁰

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Though the Rush River Commons project is a privately funded venture, the goal is to have a profound and positive impact on the community the Akre family calls home. Thus, the team leading the project engaged with the public during the initial planning and design stages. For example, they hosted a “listening tour” and met individually with community members. Over the course of a few months, the team interviewed about 60 individuals, which comprised almost half of the town’s population at the time. The team met with both those who supported and were not in favor of — or had questions about — the project. The team then incorporated the feedback they received into the project’s overall design.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *The Land*, RUSH RIVER COMMONS, <https://rushrivercommons.com/#the-land> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ RUSH RIVER COMMONS, RUSH RIVER COMMON SPECIAL USE PERMIT NARRATIVE 15 (Apr. 23, 2021), *available at* <https://rushrivercommons.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rush-River-Commons-SUP-Narrative-23APR2021-compressed.pdf>.

³⁰ *Id.*

Additionally, as of January 2022, the team had about nine public meetings with the Washington Town Council, Washington Planning Commission, and the Washington Architectural Review Board and will likely have more public meetings as the project progresses.

FUNDING

In 2019, Chuck Akre, a Rappahannock County resident and money manager, purchased the property to preserve and restore the land's natural wetlands and to develop a space that supports the local community.³¹ The Akre family is financing this entire project and has stated that this is Chuck Akre's "gift to the community of Rappahannock."³²

As of 2022, the Rush River Commons project has been transitioned to the Sherwood Fund, the Akre family's operating foundation.

NEXT STEPS

In September 2021, the Washington Town Council approved a special use permit for Rush River Commons which allows for construction to begin.³³

As construction starts, project proponents are proactively thinking about different questions that can maximize the social, economic, and environmental benefits of this work. For example, one such question is how to best preserve the long-term affordability of the housing units at Rush River Commons.

CONSIDERATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Rush River Commons project serves as an example of how mixed-use development can occur in rural areas. While often thought of as a more urban or suburban land-use concept, the design of this work balances community needs for housing, commercial services, green space, and environmental restoration in a way that is compatible with local character. Other rural areas can

³¹ Tim Carrington, *Chuck Akre: Who is the investment manager making waves in Rappahannock County?*, RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS (July 16, 2021), https://www.rappnews.com/news/environment/chuck-akre-who-is-the-investment-manager-making-waves-in-rappahannock-county/article_09120844-e674-11eb-9cbc-7785ac20392a.html; *The Land*, RUSH RIVER COMMONS, <https://rushrivercommons.com/#the-land> (last visited Nov. 1, 2021).

³² Rachel Needham, *Rush River Commons proposes residential, commercial buildings — will Washington approve?*, RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS (May 21, 2021), https://www.rappnews.com/news/realestate/rush-river-commons-proposes-residential-commercial-buildings-will-washington-approve/article_2e9da9a4-ba61-11eb-8b33-935bc2ada578.html.

³³ Ben Peters, *Town Council approves Rush River Commons*, RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS (Sept. 22, 2021), https://www.rappnews.com/news/landuse/town-council-approves-rush-river-commons/article_10ccf932-1512-11ec-aff5-2b5c2a7d8b7f.html.

think about adapting mixed-use development in ways that similarly support social and environmental resilience.

A project like Rush River Commons can also help planners and policymakers demonstrate the benefits of affordable housing to dismantle negative stereotypes. Affordable housing is often stigmatized and faces “Not in My Backyard” or “NIMBYism” barriers to being constructed in many communities. By building tangible housing developments that are affordable for a range of residents, neighbors can see what this looks like on the ground and experience the benefits that can be derived from promoting inclusive rural growth.

Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that the significant amount of private funding behind the Rush River Commons project makes it quite unique and likely difficult to replicate directly in other rural communities without a comparable financial mechanism or backing. However, the project’s team highlights that the Rush River Commons project could not have happened without the passing of the town’s PUD ordinance. Additionally, the Town of Washington’s comprehensive plan supports affordable housing and diversity, which also helped set the project up for success. Thus, policymakers can pass this type of ordinance and comprehensive plan updates to make these public-private partnerships possible.